

## Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Seniors in the Workplace

**It** is Sayed Mohammed's first day as a Senior Aide at the West Side Community Center. As administrative assistant, Mr. Mohammed photocopies materials for staff, fills in for the receptionist, and provides interpreter services to Pakistani clients who do not speak English.

Mr. Mohammed, a 66-year-old immigrant to the United States, worked for the government in Lahore, Pakistan. He can read and write English easily but has some difficulty understanding spoken English.

His supervisor at the community center is Betsy Green, the receptionist. Before going to lunch, she shows Mr. Mohammed how to run the photocopier. She speaks rapidly, explaining while she photocopies a memo. When the task is completed, she asks Mr. Mohammed if he has any questions. He says that he does not.

Ms. Green goes to lunch, and Mr. Mohammed sits at the front desk. Donald Gregory, who also works at the center, asks him for 20 copies of a memo. Mr. Mohammed says he will do it soon. Mr. Gregory nods and says he'll come back in 15 minutes.

But when he returns, he sees that the memo has not been copied. Mr. Mohammed says he was busy, but he'll make the copies soon. When pressed for a time, he repeats, "Soon."

Mr. Gregory returns in a half hour. Ms. Green has come back from lunch, and she overhears Mr. Gregory asking for the copies. Seeing that they are not done, she picks up the memo and photocopies it, looking at Mr. Mohammed in exasperation. Mr.

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Gregory thanks her and walks away, not looking at Mr. Mohammed but shaking his head slightly.

Over 21% of the U.S. population are over the age of 55, and over 10% of this group were born outside the United States. Many work or need to work. For foreign-born individuals,

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## His NCLE's Worth



**NCLE** interviews Anthony (Tony) Sarmiento, director of Senior Service America (SSA) and chair of the Center for Applied Linguistics' Board of Trustees.

**Miriam Burt:** What did you do, Tony, before becoming the director of Senior Service America?

**Tony Sarmiento:** I worked 10 years with community-based organizations in the District of Columbia, focusing on training and youth development. Then I worked for over 20 years, until 2002, at the national AFL-CIO in the areas of labor education, job training, and employment. For several years, my primary assignment there was developing programs to assist dislocated workers, those laid off from their jobs.

**MB:** Is that how you became involved with adult immigrants?

**TS:** Yes, many of the dislocated workers spoke a first language other than English, and many who were native

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## Using English on the Job

In 2000, according to data from the U.S. Census, 12% of the U.S. labor force was foreign-born. More than half (54%) of foreign-born with full-time jobs held low-income jobs, compared to 38% of the U.S. born with full-time jobs. The data revealed a positive relation between earnings and English language ability: Literacy and fluency in English seem to be related to economic self-sufficiency.

Although opportunities to learn English at work can improve work skills as well as language skills, it appears that few employers provide this instruction. One reason may be that the instruction is perceived by employers as not working: For example, after a 50-hour workplace ESL class, the employer may find that workers are still not speaking English on the job, especially with one another.

There are a number of issues employers need to consider when judging the effectiveness of English language training at the workplace. This article addresses two.

### Language Choice

Even fluent speakers of English are likely to use their native language when speaking to other native speakers of the language. Code switching (i.e. shifting from one language to another language in the course of a conversation) is a natural occurrence among bilingual workers. For example, in a conversation held in Spanish, workers may give names of

workplace machines and procedures in English. In a conversation in English, abstract concepts and personal opinions may be better expressed in Spanish. Code switching, and choosing to speak one language with one person and another language with another person to facilitate ease and comprehensibility of communication, can demonstrate bilingual proficiency rather than linguistic deficiency.

### Language and Social Identity

The decision to use or not to use the language of the workplace and the accompanying workplace behaviors may be affected by a desire to maintain one's identity. Some workers may feel empowered when they use English and try out new workplace behaviors on the job. Others, however, may make a conscious decision not to use the new language or behav-

iors as a way of asserting their own social identity.

The decision by immigrant workers not to use the new language may be affected by the attitude displayed by employers and co-workers when they try out what they have learned. Some workers who do speak English report being laughed at by native English-speaking co-workers for demonstrating non-native like pronunciation. Finally, one's co-workers who speak the same native language may apply pressure to continue to use the native language rather than English on the job.

*This article is excerpted and adapted from Issues in Improving Workers' English Language Skills, by Miriam Burt. Read the entire article at [www.cal.org/ncle/digests/workplaceissues.htm](http://www.cal.org/ncle/digests/workplaceissues.htm).*

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## Notes on the Staff

If you have ever called NCLE to order a publication or ask a question, you probably spoke with NCLE's secretary, Dawn Flanagan. Dawn provides administrative support to staff in many ways, including attending local conferences to represent NCLE at our exhibit booths.

For the past 3 years Dawn has managed the NCLE booth at the National Book Festival held on the National Mall in Washington, DC. This year, on October 4, a record 75,000 people attended the festival.



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## NCLE Continues to Meet Needs of ESL Practitioners

In January 2004, the U.S. Department of Education will discontinue the ERIC system as it has existed since 1966, with its 16 subject-specific clearinghouses and question-answering services. Consequently, all ERIC clearinghouses closed the end of December 2003. (The ERIC database will be hosted by a company contracted by the Department of Education. For information about the ERIC transition and database, visit [www.eric.ed.gov](http://www.eric.ed.gov).)

NCLE, housed at the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) in Washington, DC, was established by Congress in 1988 as an adjunct ERIC clearinghouse and funded under the English Literacy Grants of the Adult Education Act. Since then, NCLE's activities have been funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE). In 2001, NCLE's name was changed from the National *Clearinghouse* for ESL Literacy Education to the National *Center* for ESL Literacy Education, to better reflect the scope of our services. (See *NCLEnotes* Fall/Winter 2001, [www.cal.org/ncle/Nnotes92.html](http://www.cal.org/ncle/Nnotes92.html)). The closing of the ERIC system has had an impact on NCLE. However, we will continue to offer many of our services.

### NCLE Publications

NCLE publications continue to be available from the NCLE Web site ([www.cal.org/ncle](http://www.cal.org/ncle)), and paper copies can be ordered by email or phone. Most of our publications are free. Other NCLE publications can be ordered online at the *CALStore* (<http://calstore.cal.org/store>). You can also contact us for information via email ([ncle@cal.org](mailto:ncle@cal.org)) or phone (202-362-0700 x200).

### Workshops and Technical Assistance

NCLE staff will continue to provide workshops and technical assistance; unfortunately, we can no longer do so free of charge. Please check our Web site for the services we provide and contact us for more information on how we can assist your specific program.

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More than 40% of the participants in adult education programs are English language learners. There is an ongoing need for excellent programs and highly qualified professionals to serve this population. We at NCLE hope that in the near future, funding will be provided for a national center focused on adult ESL education to serve those in the field. We have found our work rewarding and have enjoyed working with all of you. We look forward to soon being able to provide much-needed technical assistance to the field, as we have in the past.

With best wishes from the NCLE staff



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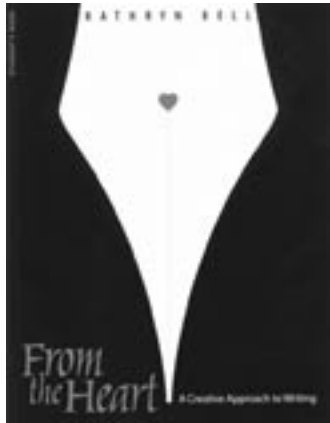
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# Resource Updates



“Whether English is a student’s first language or a new language, it’s one thing to write to meet a learning expectation . . . it’s quite another to use the language to express one’s innermost feelings.”

## ***From the Heart: A Creative Approach to***

**Writing** (Kathryn Bell, 2003) encourages students to draw on their creative talents while they develop English language skills. The book is appropriate for intermediate- to advanced-level English language learners and is organized into four sections:

- 1) *Heartfelt Breakthroughs* offers activities that “break through” inhibitions about writing and encourage learners to write about how they feel. One activity asks learners to write a description of someone they love without using the word “love.”
- 2) *Finding Inspiration* for writing through ordinary things in daily life is the focus of this section. In one activity, learners describe a new use for a household object (e.g., salad spinner, umbrella, bottle opener, or compact disc).
- 3) *Editing and Polishing* shows learners how to revise their work and express ideas clearly. In one activity, learners take something they have written and change all forms of the verb “to be” to active verbs.
- 4) *Long-Term Projects* allow learners time to reflect on a subject and to prepare their work before presenting it. In one activity, learners write about a value or belief that has passed down through several generations of their family and how it has affected their life.

The Teacher’s Edition includes lesson plans and sections on Using *From the Heart* with ESL Students, Assessing and Evaluating Creative Writing, Ideas for Student Publishing, and Ideas for Guest Speakers. *From the Heart: A Creative Approach to Writing* is available from Pippin Publishing. Call toll-free 888-889-0001 or visit [www.pippinpub.com](http://www.pippinpub.com).

How do you begin to teach learners who are not literate in their native language to speak, read, and write English?

***Literacy Plus: Language, Lifeskills, Civics*** (Joan Saslow, 2003) is a two-level course in survival English and basic literacy for adults. ***Literacy Plus A*** is for students who are preliterate in their native language and know no English. ***Literacy Plus B*** is designed either to follow *Literacy Plus A* or to be used with students who have some literacy in their native language but none in English.

Each unit of the course provides practice in basic literacy, survival English, and civics. (Civics, in this case, refers to a set of concepts that introduce learners to “expected social behavior” in the United States. For example, it is okay to tell a salesperson that something is wrong with the merchandise or that it is too expensive, and it is important to bring references to a job interview.) Audio cassettes of survival English dialogues that begin each unit are also available.

The Teacher’s Edition provides scope-and-sequence charts and step-by-step instructions for each lesson. It also includes a CD-ROM with extra practice worksheets, a placement test, and performance-based achievement tests, all which can be printed and duplicated. Also packaged with the Teacher’s Edition are picture flashcards for vocabulary, numbers and letters, and phonics. A Guide for Native-Language Tutors helps tutors or classroom aides supplement the civics section by presenting it in the students’ native language.

*Literacy Plus: Language, Lifeskills, Civics* is published by Pearson Longman ESL. To place an order, call toll-free 800-263-3678 or visit their Web site at [www.longmanesl.ca](http://www.longmanesl.ca).

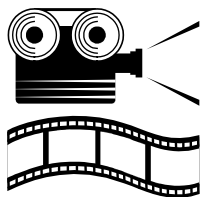




**B**arine, an Ogoni from Nigeria, is the mother of four teenagers. Before fleeing Nigeria to a refugee camp in Benin, she owned a catering school and two restaurants. Now she lives in Chicago and works in a hotel kitchen.

Ricardo is a baseball pitcher who has been recruited by the Los Angeles Dodgers from the Dominican Republic. He learns firsthand about the diversity of his new country—from spring training in Florida to professional ball in “overwhelmingly white” Great Falls, Montana.

These are two of the newcomers featured in the documentary miniseries, **The New Americans**, to be broadcast on PBS this spring (March 29–31). Along with Barine and Ricardo, the series follows the lives of Naima, a Palestinian bride living in New York; Pedro, a Mexican working as a meatpacker in rural Kansas; and Anjan, an East Indian computer programmer pursuing the American Dream. Their lives are documented for 4 years, starting before they leave their countries, then coming to the United States, adjusting to a new culture, finding work, raising children, and connecting with their families back home and with their new communities.



*The New Americans* is produced by Kartemquin Films and presented by Independent Television Service (ITVS). More information on the series and related resources, including lesson plans, are located at [www.pbs.org/newamericans](http://www.pbs.org/newamericans).

A home video of the series will be available after its PBS viewing and can be ordered from Reso Direct, PO Box 2284, South Burlington, VT 05407, 800-572-8918.

*Visit the NCLE Web site for all your adult ESL teaching needs*

**[www.cal.org/ncle](http://www.cal.org/ncle)**

- Over 75 Digests and Q&As
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## **Seniors—Continued from page 1**

especially seniors, performing in the U.S. workplace is a cross-cultural skill, which like language and literacy skills, must be taught. This fictional account of Sayed Mohammed's first day on his job depicts a number of cultural and language obstacles.

What language and cultural skills do immigrant seniors need to function successfully in the U.S. workplace? How can programs that provide training and job opportunities to seniors help them succeed?

In response to these questions, staff at the National Center for ESL Literacy Education (NCLE) and at Senior Service America (SSA) are developing a guidebook for practitioners and programs working with linguistically and culturally diverse seniors. Funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, SSA provides training and employment opportunities to older adults, many who are refugees or immigrants, and places them in part-time subsidized jobs in local nonprofit and community-based organizations. (See *His NCLE's Worth* for an interview with Tony Sarmiento, director of SSA.)

*The Guide for Working With Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Seniors* is written specifically for the staff of organizations that offer ESL classes and other training to immigrant and refugee workers, organizations that provide healthcare and social services, and organizations that hire seniors whose first language is not English. The guide provides background information on how adults, particularly older adults, learn a new language and why they may need to work; discusses the relationship between culture and language in the workplace; and offers tools for assessing student needs and for developing and evaluating programs and curricula.

The guide includes a section of fictional Aide Profiles, such as the one of Mr. Mohammed. Following each profile are discussion questions and a selection of learning, culture, and language tips, which staff can adapt for use with seniors.

*The Guide for Working With Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Seniors* will be available in Spring 2004 from the Center for Applied Linguistics and can be ordered online at <http://calstore.cal.org/store>.

# The Book Shelf



## **Paper Fish**

By Tina De Rosa

2003, Feminist Press, ISBN 155861439-7

Reviewed by Miriam Burt

**M**any people living in the United States today have grandparents or great-grandparents who immigrated here in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1910, 15% of the U.S. population were immi-

grants—the highest percentage in the last century and above the 11% reported in 2002 (U.S. Census Bureau).

Immigrants from Italy, especially from southern Italy, formed the largest single ethnic group that came to the United States in the early 1900s. Many went no further than New York. Others moved deeper into the heart of the country, setting up communities on the West Side of Chicago. It is one of these communities, called “Little Italy,” that Tina De Rosa writes about in her novel, *Paper Fish*.

The story takes place during the 1940s and 1950s. The two main characters are a child, Carmolina Bella Casa, and her paternal grandmother, Doria. Doria is a first-generation Italian American, having left her small town in the hills near Naples as a young woman.

Doria is a widow; her husband, Dominic, had died years earlier. He had owned a grocery store, “created out of his own hands with the small money he had brought from Italy.” The store was on the first floor of the home, “beneath their own feet, beneath the floor of the kitchen.” When Dominic died, the grocery store closed: “The store was boarded up. Women who remembered the day Doria was dressed as a bride wept into their hands, and their children took the money from the selling of the store to buy the family’s burying place with its stone, and Dominic entered, first and alone.”

Doria can still hear his voice, the “heavy Italian coming slowly out from under his moustache.” She remembers the nights when, after the children went to bed, they would sit on the back porch, and “his voice which never

learned English, spoke to her mind which knew only Italian.”

Little Italy is a world where extended families live together in cold-water flats; laundry dries on clotheslines outside the windows; and women “dress on Sundays in black, on Tuesdays in black, and during the rest of the week [in] black.” In Little Italy, cars share the streets and alleys with Gustavo the ragpicker and his blind horse; Consuelo complains about the quality of the onions she pulls off Giuppeto’s horse-drawn vegetable cart; and Mrs. Shiavone, the butcher’s wife, whacks off the heads of the chickens “when they aren’t looking.”

When she is eight, Carmolina runs away, using most of the money her grandmother gave her for groceries that morning. The child takes a streetcar to another part of the city and finds herself in a place where people do not speak Italian and boys on wooden scooters call her “dago,” chase her, and steal her remaining nickels and dimes. Carmolina is lost and without money. The names of the streets “don’t make sense.” She hums an Italian love song to herself, presumably to give herself courage.

Read the book to find out what happens to Carmolina before the inevitable urban renewal begins in the 1960s and the neighborhood is torn down. As De Rosa writes, “The houses of the families with their tongues of rugs sticking out were smashed down, the houses filled with soup pots and quick anger, filled with forks and knives and recipes written in the heads of women, were struck in the sides with the ball of the wrecking crane and bedclothes and plaster spilled out.”

*Paper Fish* is a short (123 pages) but powerful book. The writing is lyrical, almost poetic. And, you don’t have to be Italian-American to sigh at the loss of this community, the razing of a place where people spoke a Mediterranean language to each other, grandmothers made decisions for the whole family, and women lit candles before images of the Madonna in every room of the house.

# New Publications

## ☐ **Second Language Acquisition in Adults: Research to Practice**

by Donna Moss & Lauren Ross-Feldman

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is the study of how second languages are learned and the factors that influence the process. This Q&A discusses recent research in three areas of SLA within the context of adult ESL instruction: the affect of learner motivation, the role of interaction, and the role of vocabulary.

## ☐ **Issues in Improving Immigrant Workers' English Language Skills**

by Miriam Burt

This brief identifies five issues specific to the English language skills of immigrant workers and how to address these issues through workplace instruction: (1) length of time needed to learn English; (2) language use in the workplace and elsewhere; (3) language and identity; (4) relationship between training and performance; and (5) measuring outcomes.

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## ☐ **Valid, Reliable, and Appropriate Assessments for Adult English Language Learners**

by Dorry Kenyon & Carol Van Duzer

Program staff and state and national policy makers need to make informed choices about appropriate assessments for adult English language learners. This Q&A defines the terms valid, reliable, and appropriate from a language-testing perspective as they apply to assessment issues raised by the National Reporting System for Adult Education (NRS).

## ☐ **Reading and Adult English Language Learners: The Role of the First Language**

by Miriam Burt & Joy Kreeft Peyton

Excerpted from the book, this four-page brief focuses on how literacy in the first language affects the acquisition of reading skills in English and the ways instruction should be delivered.

## ☐ **Working With Literacy-Level Adult ESL Learners**

by MaryAnn Cunningham Florez & Lynda Terrill

This Q&A identifies literacy-level learners, examines what skills they need to develop, and discusses the scope of literacy-level classes along with appropriate activities and techniques on lesson planning and classroom management.

## ☐ **English Language Instruction for Incarcerated Youth**

by Margo Delli Carpini

This digest discusses the specific issues and challenges of teaching English to linguistically and culturally diverse incarcerated youth. It suggests best practices and models to provide this intervention in correctional settings.

## ☐ **Video-Based Distance Education for Adult English Language Learners**

by Sylvia Ramirez & K. Lynn Savage

To meet the demands of a growing population, adult ESL programs are turning to distance education as a learning option. This four-page brief identifies the advantages and challenges of using video-based distance education with adult English language learners and provides practical strategies for implementing a distance education program.

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### ***His NCLE's Worth—Continued from page 1***

English speakers had difficulties reading and writing. So we developed publications and programs that provided literacy and ESL education. This work led to my first contact with CAL.

**MB:** Now you are the director of Senior Service America. Tell us a little about SSA and the Senior Aides program.

**TS:** SSA is one of 13 organizations that receives grants from the U.S. Department of Labor to run the national Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP), which places low-income seniors—those over the age of 55—in subsidized, part-time jobs in community service. The seniors in our program are called “Senior Aides.”

**MB:** SCSEP has been around for some time, hasn't it?

**TS:** SCSEP began during President Johnson's War on Poverty, when the federal government was creating jobs in the public sector for poor people. The philosophy behind SCSEP is to help older people in poverty learn new skills by working in part-time jobs for minimum wage in nonprofit organizations or public agencies. These

jobs are subsidized by SCSEP funds. As the participating seniors learn new skills, we help them find employment in regular jobs that are not subsidized by SCSEP.

**MB:** How many of these seniors find jobs in the regular job market?

**TS:** We hope that of the 10,000 seniors who participate in our program this year, 35–40% will find jobs that are not subsidized by our grant.

**MB:** How many seniors in the program are immigrants, refugees, or speak a language other than English as their first language?

**TS:** Until now it has been a small but growing percentage. In the past year, we have focused more of our attention and resources on finding ways to better serve more seniors whose first language is not English.

**MB:** Are there certain areas of the United States where your work is focused on this population?

**TS:** We're focusing special attention on the southeastern states, where the foreign-born population has grown the most in the last decade. However,

we're interested in helping all 107 of our agencies build the capacity to work with all populations—whether with Chinese in New York, Somalis in Minneapolis, or Latinos in Charlotte.

**MB:** What is your vision for the Senior Aides program?

**TS:** We need to be able to meet several competing goals spelled out by the program's enabling legislation, the Older Americans Act: achieve a rate of unsubsidized job placement for participating seniors that is acceptable to the Department of Labor; offer high-quality services and learning opportunities that meet the needs of the seniors and their communities; and serve seniors who have multiple barriers to employment, including, of course, barriers related to language, literacy, and culture.

**MB:** So this is where the guidebook comes in?

**TS:** That's right. As we finish the book and other materials, we hope to make them available to everyone who works with this growing segment of our aging community.